

A BRANCHING UNIT ADAPTED TO BE INTEGRATED INTO A SUBMARINE
TELECOMMUNICATION SYSTEM, A SUBMARINE TELECOMMUNICATION SYSTEM,
AND A METHOD OF RECONFIGURING A SUBMARINE TELECOMMUNICATION
SYSTEM

5 CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application is based on French Patent Application No. 03 01 585 filed February 11, 2003, the disclosure of which is hereby incorporated by reference thereto in its entirety, and the priority of which is hereby claimed under 35 U.S.C. §119.

10 BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of the invention

The present invention relates to a branching unit for a submarine telecommunication system.

Description of the prior art

15 Submarine systems were originally installed to connect two terrestrial optical and electrical power supply terminals (also known as power feed equipments (PFE)) on either side of the Atlantic Ocean, for example. A later improvement comprised three terrestrial optical and electrical power supply terminals connected by a branching unit. Accordingly, in terms of its
20 electrical function, each terminal is connected to one end of an electrical conductor the other end of which is connected to one of the three terminals of the branching unit.

By extension, there can be more than three terrestrial terminals interconnected by the appropriate number of conductor segments and
25 branching units, each of the latter always having three terminals.

In operation, and at a given time, a trunk current, typically of 1 A, flows between two of the three terminals, the first connection fed with power in this way being defined as a trunk. A branch current flows between a marine ground attached to the branching unit and the last of the three
30 terminals, which is isolated from the trunk, and the second connection fed with power in this way is defined as a branch.

There are therefore three configurations, depending on the terrestrial terminal chosen for the branch. The basic electrical function of a branching unit is to provide a choice between the three configurations.

35 A standard branching unit comprises three relays each comprising a

contact and a coil that opens the associated contact when it is supplied with current.

The contacts are normally closed: the three terminals are connected and no current flows. If trunk current is sent from one of the trunk terminals, it flows in the coil that controls the contact associated with the "branch" terminal and connected to the last terminal. Opening the contact isolates the branch from the trunk. When the trunk current reaches a sufficient value, the third terminal is connected to the submarine ground.

At present, a reconfiguration, i.e. a change of trunk and branch, is initiated by the users of the terminals that send the relays of the branching unit currents suitable for the appropriate switching actions.

Human error can therefore create an unwanted configuration and likewise a transient disturbance can reduce the trunk current and create a fortuitous reconfiguration.

It has been proposed to add optically controlled additional relays to the branching unit, to lock or unlock the existing configuration, managing the isolation of the branch.

However, both the architecture and the use of the branching unit become more complex. New states are created between the passage from one configuration to another. The reconfiguration process is therefore difficult to use. Furthermore, the locking/unlocking functions are not offered for the contacts associated with the trunk.

Finally, because of the new relays, the branching unit does not protect the system against human error leading to closing of a relay when live, which is known as hot switching, and which is liable to damage the relay.

The object of the invention is to guard against accidental reconfiguration and hot switching and to simplify reconfiguration procedures.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

To this end, the present invention proposes a branching unit adapted to be integrated into a submarine telecommunication system comprising at least three cables having optical and electrical transmission members, the unit comprising three terminals connected to the electrical transmission members of the cables, three input points, and three electrical contacts each between one of the terminals and one of the input points, in which unit, in an operating configuration, and at a given

time, a first terminal and a second terminal are electrically connected together and form a trunk segment adapted to convey a trunk current, and a third terminal is electrically connected to a submarine ground to form a branch segment adapted to convey a branch current, the
5 branching unit further comprising reconfiguration means adapted to control the electrical contacts for switching purposes, voltage measuring means for measuring a voltage indicating the potential at a point on the trunk segment, means for receiving and processing optical reconfiguration signals, any optical reconfiguration request being made
10 by means of an optical reconfiguration signal, and reconfiguration validation means coupled to the voltage measuring means and to the reception and processing means and adapted to activate the reconfiguration means in accordance with the optical reconfiguration signal only if the absolute value of the potential is below a threshold.

15 The invention provides a simple solution to the problem of control by current only, preventing accidental reconfiguration and hot switching, through a double level of authorization: a conforming optical request is applied subject to the value of the potential on the trunk segment.

Moreover, the potential on the trunk segment, which depends on its
20 position relative to the two terrestrial terminals and their respective potentials, can reach several kV. In the prior art, any fortuitous switching at this level of potential risks damaging the contacts.

The value of the threshold is therefore made low, to prevent the contacts closing at a high voltage that might destroy them.

25 Thus, the branching unit according to the invention remains operational but is self-protected.

The voltage measuring means can advantageously be associated with a voltage divider between said point of the trunk segment and a point of the branch segment.

30 Thus a low voltage proportional to the voltage between these two segments is measured, which protects the components of the measuring means.

The voltage divider can be of the resistive type and comprise at least one first resistor connected at one end to one of said trunk segment points
35 and branch segment points and at the other end to a second resistor having

a higher value than the first resistor and which is connected to the other of said trunk segment points and branch segment points.

A resistive voltage divider is preferred over a capacitive divider because of its longer service life.

5 The threshold is preferably less than or equal to 100 V.

In a preferred embodiment, the three sliding electrical contacts are electromechanical.

Each electrical contact is formed of a mobile first conductive part and a second conductive part, the mobile first parts being fastened to the second parts in the operating configuration and sliding on the second parts for switching.

This particular structure of the sliding contacts has the advantage over relay contacts of being insensitive to current fluctuations and simplifies the architecture of the branching unit, the coils no longer being necessary.

15 In an advantageous embodiment, the conductive mobile parts are fastened to the same mobile support to allow simultaneous switching, in order to reduce the number of switching steps to be carried out.

The switching operations are preferably coupled and the length of the mobile conductive parts is greater than the gaps between two second parts.

20 For all three operating configurations, the trunk current flows in the same electrical line between the first and second input points and the branch current flows in another electrical line between the third input point and the marine ground. Also, the same means according to the invention are used for each of the three configurations.

The input terminals are therefore assigned to the fixed electrical line by the required operating configuration. Thanks to the mobility of the first part, this assignment is obtained by adjusting the positions of the contacts.

30 Furthermore, the chosen lengths guarantee that there is no open circuit position: there is a transitory double contact during coupled switching. The contacts are protected from the arcing phenomena that occur when live contacts are opened.

Furthermore, the transitory double contacts do not represent a problem: the double contact positions ground the terminals, which is not a problem, especially if the trunk segment and the branch segment are

substantially at potentials close to 0 V.

The sliding contacts can advantageously be rectilinear or about a rotation axis.

5 The branching unit according to the invention preferably comprises means for identifying the existence and the sign of the trunk current at the first and second terminals and the existence and the sign of the branch current at the third terminal.

10 Furthermore, said optical request defines which two of the three terminals are to be used to form a reconfigured trunk, and the reconfiguration validation means are then adapted to authorize the optical request only if the currents at the terminals defined for the reconfigured trunk are of opposite sign or zero in the operating configuration.

15 The branching unit preferably comprises memory means for storing the optical configuration signal, for example for a given delay and/or until the reconfiguration is validated.

In an advantageous embodiment, the branching unit comprises at least one first electronic control card supplied with power by one of the trunk and branch currents and incorporating all of said means.

20 It preferably comprises a second electronic control card supplied with power by the other of the trunk and branch currents and comprising means similar to said means of the first card.

25 If a fault in the branch creates a short circuit to the sea, for example, one of the two cards is no longer supplied with power and therefore can no longer manage validation of reconfiguration. Thus, using two cards improves the protection of the branching unit even in the event of problems on the network and protects against accidental reconfiguration.

30 The invention naturally applies to a submarine telecommunication system comprising at least three equipments chosen from terrestrial terminals and branching units and connected to the cables, at least one of the equipments being connected to or corresponding to a terrestrial terminal comprising means for sending optical configuration signals, and at least one branching unit as defined hereinabove.

35 The invention applies equally to a method of reconfiguring a submarine telecommunication system as defined hereinabove, the method comprising sending the optical reconfiguration signal to the branching

unit, voltage measurement by the voltage measuring means, validation of reconfiguration in accordance with the optical reconfiguration signal if the absolute value of the potential is below the threshold, and reconfiguration comprising switching the electrical contacts.

5 The switching is preferably effected by simultaneous and coupled movement of the first parts of the sliding contacts.

 A first embodiment of the method comprises, before said sending operation, an operation of adjusting the voltages at the terrestrial terminals associated with the trunk current, so as to obtain said threshold with the trunk
10 current maintained.

 A second embodiment of the method comprises, after said sending operation, an operation of progressively correcting the voltages at the terrestrial power supply terminals associated with the trunk current, so as to obtain said threshold with the trunk current maintained.

15 Features and advantages of the invention will become clearly apparent on reading the following description, which is given by way of illustrative and nonlimiting example and with reference to the appended drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

20 Figure 1 shows diagrammatically a submarine telecommunication system integrating a branching unit constituting a preferred embodiment of the invention.

 Figure 2 is a diagrammatic representation of the figure 1 branching unit.

25 DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

 Figure 1 shows a submarine telecommunication system 100 integrating a branching unit 10 constituting a preferred embodiment of the invention.

30 The submarine telecommunication system 100 comprises three terrestrial optical and electrical power supply terminals 1A, 1B, 1C respectively connected to one end of three cables 2A, 2B, 2C each comprising an optical fiber 3A, 3B, 3C for the propagation of optical signals S and an electrical conductor 4A, 4B, 4C.

 Each electrical conductor 4A, 4B, 4C is further connected to a
35 respective terminal A, B, C of the branching unit 10.

In a first operating configuration chosen by way of example, the trunk is the connection between the first and second terminals 1A, 1B at respective variable voltages V_A , V_B respectively equal to +6 kV and -4 kV, for example.

5 The first terminal A and the second terminal B are electrically connected, forming a trunk segment (shown in dashed line) at a potential of +3 kV, for example. Thus a trunk current i_1 flows from the first terminal 1A to the second terminal 1B, the first terminal A is the trunk current input terminal, and the second terminal B is the trunk current output terminal.

10 Moreover, the branch is the connection between the third terminal 1C at an adjustable voltage V_C equal to +10 kV, for example, and a marine ground M of the branching unit 10. A branching current i_2 therefore flows from the third terminal 1C to the marine ground M, the third terminal C is the input terminal for the branch current i_2 and forms with the marine ground a branch segment (shown in dashed line) at a potential close to 0 V.

15 According to the invention, a reconfiguration request is optical and consists in sending an optical reconfiguration signal containing reconfiguration information.

An optical reconfiguration signal Sr_B is delivered, for example via a coupler 5B in the optical fiber 3B, to first means 21 for receiving and
20 processing optical reconfiguration signals, preferably duplicated by similar second means 21', or even triplicated. The means 21, 21' are preferably capable of receiving and decoding any optical reconfiguration signal Sr_A , Sr_B , Sr_C coming from any of the terminals 1A, 1B, 1C provided with appropriate sending means (not shown).

25 Figure 2 shows diagrammatically the branching unit 10 whose architecture is described in detail mainly in association with its electrical connection function.

The branching unit 10 comprises three input points E1, E2, E3 in electrical contact with the respective terminals A, B, C in the first operating
30 configuration shown in figure 1 via three electromechanical contacts 7, 7', 7'' that are preferably sliding contacts. Thus the terminals A and B are linked to form the trunk segment including the electrical circuit T12 and the terminal C and the ground M are linked to form the branch segment including the electrical circuit T3.

35 The electrical circuit T12 is assigned to the trunk current and the

electrical circuit T3 is assigned to the branch current in all configurations.

Each sliding contact 7, 7', 7" is formed of a first conductive mobile part (shown in thicker line) 71, 71', 71" and a fixed second conductive part 72, 72', 72" (also shown in thicker line). In the first operating configuration the first
5 mobile parts 71, 71', 71" are fastened to the respective second parts 72, 72', 72".

The mobile parts 71, 71', 71" are fastened to the same mobile support 8 for simultaneous and preferably coupled switching.

The lengths of the mobile parts 71, 71', 71" are greater than the
10 spaces d7 between two second parts 72, 72', 72", which creates double transient contacts during the three simultaneous switching operations.

The branching unit 10 further comprises a first electronic control card 10 supplied with power by the trunk current i_1 and which includes:

- first means 21 for receiving and processing optical reconfiguration
15 signals S_{rB} ,

- preferably, first memory means 22 for storing optical configuration signals,

- first voltage measuring means 23 for measuring a voltage U_1 indicating the potential at any point of the trunk segment P_{12} , for example at
20 the trunk current input,

- preferably, first identification means 24a for identifying the existence and the sign of the trunk current and first identification means 24b for identifying the existence and the sign of the branch current,

- first reconfiguration validation means 25 coupled to the means 21 to
25 24 and adapted to authorize or prohibit reconfiguration, and

- first reconfiguration means 26 coupled to the reconfiguration validation means 25 and adapted to command the switching of the contacts 7, 7', 7" after validation.

The branching unit 10 preferably comprises a second electronic
30 control card 20' supplied with power by the branch current i_2 and which includes second means 21' to 26' similar to the first means 21 to 26.

Reconfiguration is therefore effected when at least two conditions are satisfied:

- an optical reconfiguration and where applicable decoding signal
35 is received for reading configuration information,

- the absolute value of the potential on the trunk segment is below a threshold that is preferably less than or equal to 100 V.

Furthermore, as the optical request defines two of the three terminals to form a trunk, reconfiguration is preferably authorized when the currents at
5 the two terminals chosen for the trunk are zero or of opposite sign in the first configuration.

For example, starting from the first configuration, a reconfiguration defining the terminal B in a branch and the terminals A and C in a reconfigured trunk is prohibited, whereas reconfiguration by defining the
10 terminal A in a branch and the terminals C and B in a reconfigured trunk is permitted.

The first and second voltage measuring means 21, 21' are associated with a standard voltage divider 9 between the point P_{12} of the trunk segment and any point P_3 of the branch segment, for example at the input for the
15 branch current i_2 .

The voltage divider 9 is preferably of the resistive type and comprises a first resistor R1 connected at one end to the point P_{12} of the trunk segment and in series with a second resistor R2 having a value very much higher than that of the first resistor and itself in series with a third resistor R3 similar to the
20 first resistor R1 and connected to the point P_3 of the branch segment.

If reconfiguration is authorized, there are three switching actions: the mobile parts 71, 71', 71" slide on the second parts 72, 72', 72" about a rotation axis Z by virtue of rotation of the mobile support 8.

For example, for reconfiguration with the terminal A in a branch, the
25 mobile support 8 rotates 120° clockwise. During switching, the mobile parts 71, 71', 71" come into common contact with the second parts 72, 72', 72" and other second parts 72', 72", 72, respectively.

Of course, the logic controlling movement of the mobile support 8 is adjusted to ensure that the parallel operation of the first and second
30 reconfiguration means 26, 26' leads only to the required switching actions.

The reconfiguration method according to the invention therefore comprises:

- sending the optical reconfiguration signal S_{r8} to the branching unit
10,
- 35 - voltage measurement by the first and/or second voltage

measuring means 23, 23',

- validating reconfiguration by the first and/or second reconfiguration validation means 25, 25', in accordance with said optical reconfiguration signal if the absolute value of the potential of the trunk segment P₁₂ is below the threshold, and

- reconfiguration by switching the electrical contacts 7, 7', 7'' under the control of the first and/or second reconfiguration means 26, 26'.

In a first method, to achieve validation, sending is preceded by adjusting the variable voltages V_A, V_B at the terrestrial trunk terminals 1A, 1B to reach the threshold whilst maintaining the trunk current.

In a second method, to achieve validation, sending is followed by progressively correcting the variable voltages V_A, V_B at the terrestrial trunk terminals 1A, 1B to reach the threshold whilst maintaining the trunk current.

In the chosen example, if the voltage V_A becomes equal to +3 kV and the voltage V_B becomes equal to -7 kV, the potential at P₁₂ on the trunk segment is 0 V: the measured voltage U₁ is therefore below the threshold: reconfiguration in accordance with an optical reconfiguration signal is possible.

In a variant of the preferred embodiment, the contacts move in a straight line.

Of course, the foregoing description has been given by way of illustration only. Any means can be replaced by equivalent means without departing from the scope of the invention.